

County's budget is filled with holes, not hope

A long-term budget vision is needed for County

Recently, County Executive Scott Walker said his 2007 Recommended County Budget “is filled with a vision of hope for Milwaukee County”. Far from being filled with hope, this budget puts many long-standing services in jeopardy, and the recipients of these services in despair. As leaders of the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors, we would like to offer a different perspective and rebuttal to the County Executive's comments.

Public Safety

The County Executive wrote, “public safety is a priority.” Yet, his budget demonstrates the opposite. He proposed cutting bailiffs for courtroom security from 71 to 63 posts and eliminating 16 Deputy Sheriffs who assist with warrant and arrest orders. He also proposed an arbitrary cut of \$2 million in the District Attorney's office, which would dramatically reduce staffing and ultimately result in slower prosecution of criminals.

These cuts would hamper public safety officials' ability to properly protect our citizens. We have heard the public outcry for swift, firm justice. We feel this budget moves Milwaukee County in the wrong direction.

Human Services

We applaud the initiative to provide quality housing to people with mental illness. But the County Executive failed to mention any of his cuts in other human service areas. He would eliminate the important 211 phone line, which provides centralized information on access to emergency services to those in need, and is funded through a collaborative partnership between the County, businesses and community organizations.

He also eliminated full funding of \$150,000 from the Youth Sports Authority, which serves as a prevention program to promote positive team-building recreational activities for disadvantaged youth to keep them away from drugs and criminal activity.

Too many of our youth are sent to juvenile justice facilities at a cost of over \$76,000 per year each. The Youth Sports Authority helps keep kids out of jail and instead in positive activities.

County Parks

Soon after the Walker Administration estimated the cost of deferred maintenance in our Parks at \$150 million, the County Executive short-sightedly proposed cutting the equivalent of 83 full time positions who maintain our parks. Staff reductions of this type and magnitude will only exacerbate the problems in our parks.

Simultaneously, he is selling a metamorphosis of the County pool system, which, in a number of instances, will mean closing local public pools. Instead of presenting genuine solutions to the Board, the County Executive repeats his call for State legislation to create a park district, as if his proposal is some cure-all for our parks. His proposed magic bullet is an illusion that ignores the fact that our parks require additional funds. We do not need an additional layer of bureaucracy to govern our parks.

Mass Transit

The County Executive claimed his budget “restores” Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) bus routes without increasing tax levy. In actuality, these routes are merely continued.

Further, what the County Executive euphemistically called a reduction in “the discount on passes,” really is a 21% increase for regular bus riders (from \$14 to \$17 for a weekly bus pass or book of 10 tickets – an annual increase of \$156). And he wants Milwaukee Public School students who ride the bus to pay 16% more (from \$13.75 to \$16.00 per weekly bus pass) to get to school. This is a hefty tax increase for those who ride the bus.

Pension Obligation Bonds

Contrary to the County Executive’s simplistic statement that his proposal to use 30-year Pension Obligation Bonds (POBs) to fund the County’s pension liability “is like moving debt from a high interest card to a lower interest card,” the issuance of POBs is complex and risky. Its results would depend on how the bonds are structured and on the performance of the financial markets. Moreover, issuance of POBs as recommended would require a change in State law.

We wish it were as simple as switching credit cards, but it is not. The County Board will cautiously review the POB proposal based on its long-term benefit to the community, not on a simple credit card analogy.

Property Tax Levy

Once again, the County Executive has touted a zero tax levy budget. In reality, he has built his 2007 Recommended Budget off last years modest tax increase, which the County Board approved, at political expense, to preserve services vital to the people. Yet, he still claims it is a no cost increase budget.

Milwaukee County has been operating under a State-imposed property tax *rate* freeze since 1993 and has stayed well under the property tax rate allowed by the State, while the cost of State-imposed mandates continue to rise and State funding for mandates remains flat.

The new property tax *levy* cap recently imposed by the State more severely limits the ability of Milwaukee County to raise revenue to provide quality of life programs as well as mandated the services. Currently, the County is approximately \$9.8 million under the *levy* cap for 2007. But this cap effectively reduces the County’s future ability to raise revenues by approximately \$45 million. The “budget hole” the County Executive spent the summer talking about actually was largely generated by this recent tax freeze. Even worse for the County would have been other hard freeze proposals advocated by some State legislators which would have further limited the ability to fund quality of life services.

The County Executive’s 2007 Recommended Budget raises many other areas of concern. We have responded directly to the issues he highlighted in his recent article.

The County Board will continue to deliberate on the 2007 Recommended Budget through October. The Board will host the annual public hearing on the Budget on Monday, October 30, 2006 at 7p.m., at the Zoofari Center, 9715 W. Bluemound Rd. All citizens are invited to attend. Your input is important to us and will help us as we deliberate on the budget.

Be it public safety, human services, parks, transit, financing, taxes, or other areas, the County Board is committed to producing a balanced budget that ensures a positive long-term vision for the future of Milwaukee County. We will not lose sight that the services provided by Milwaukee County make this a great place to live, work and raise a family.

Lee Holloway, Chairman Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

Richard D. Nyklewicz, Jr., 1st Vice Chairman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

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